

The Achievement Index – Taking Stock of Our Schools

The half way point in any journey marks a good time for reflection and revision.

Have we made progress? Are we heading the right direction? Is there something we need to do differently?

Mid-way through this school year, it is appropriate that we ask these questions of our public schools. Answering those questions, however, is not always easy. A school's performance can change depending on the lens we use. And with all that schools are expected to do, opinions on school performance can vary from one parent to the next, or from one neighbor to the other.

Not surprisingly, the most common assessment of a school's performance is test scores, but analyzing test scores can be daunting for those of us not working daily in the classroom, or comfortable with statistics.

To counter that, the Washington State Board of Education offers a helpful tool, called the Achievement Index, designed to help users better understand our schools' performance on state assessments. The Achievement Index compiles scores from the state assessments (in reading, writing, math, and science) to develop a snapshot of a school and district's performance in a given year. Users of the Index can also see the achievement of student sub groups (by ethnicity or income level), how a school performed compared to schools of similar student demographics, and how a school has or has not improved over time.

The State Board of Education, responsible for maintaining the Index, also partners with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to use the Index for recognition of Washington's top-performing public schools. This annual recognition program, the Washington Achievement Awards, celebrates the state's highest-achieving schools in multiple categories.

The Spokane region was fortunate to have several award-winning schools.

In the future, as Washington explores the possibility of seeking a waiver from the current federal No Child Left Behind requirements, the Index may evolve to be the primary measure for all of our state's schools' performance. It is an improvement upon the federal government's preferred calculation – called “*adequate yearly progress*” (AYP) – which sets unrealistic goals, lacks multiple measures of success, and fails to make the necessary adjustments when comparing the achievement of diverse groups of students.

It is certainly possible that various media sources may use the Index to single out struggling schools. Though the Index does offer a ranking system for schools (ranging from “struggling” to “exemplary”), the State Board believes that simply identifying a school as “struggling” is not enough. The Board sees meaningful accountability as a partnership with schools. Accountability should be coupled with assistance to ensure long-lasting, meaningful reform.

As evidenced by the 2012 *McCleary v. Washington* ruling, the state is inadequately funding all schools. In addition, the legislature has yet to allocate funds for a statewide accountability program. We have been stalwart advocates for increased revenues to support our schools. If the Achievement Index is identified as the new statewide and federally-approved accountability measure, we will make every effort to ensure that schools identified for improvement have the resources necessary to make meaningful reforms.

For now, the State Board will continue to utilize the Index to recognize excellence in our public schools through the Washington Achievement Awards, and as a valuable tool of analysis for all of Washington's schools.

This spring, we will introduce a new web-based tool for the Index. We hope you use it. Explore your local schools. See who some of the top-performing schools are in your area, and also take note of schools that are heading in the right direction.

And finally, remember too that the Achievement Index is just one measure of a school. Test scores are one helpful way of gauging a school's progress, but it is certainly not the only one. Test results alone cannot reflect the rich array of knowledge and skills that good public schools impart on their students.

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